Patrons and Artists in Late 15th-Century Florence

In the late fifteenth century, Florence had more woodcarvers than butchers, suggesting that art, even more than meat, was a necessity of life. This was true not only for the wealthy, but also for those of more modest means. In 1472, the city boasted fifty-four workshops for marble and stone; it employed forty-four master gold- and silversmiths, and at least thirty master painters. Florence's position in the wool and silk industries relied on its reputation for quality—a tradition of craftsmanship that made discerning patrons of its merchants and financiers.

Most commissions were for religious works. Many banking families, for example, viewed the funding of altarpieces and chapels as a kind of penance for usury (money-lending at interest), which was condemned by the church but inherent to their profession. As the 1400s progressed, however, patrons became increasingly interested in personal fame and worldly prestige. Lavish, even ostentatious, public display became more common, even as the fortunes of the city declined. New subjects from mythology found eager audiences impressed by such evidence of learning. And, by the end of the century—for the first time since antiquity—some art was being made simply "for art's sake."

Among the greatest patrons in fifteenth-century Florence were members of the powerful Medici family, who ruled as princes, though the city was, in name, a republic. The works in this room date from the time of Lorenzo de' Medici, the Magnificent, whom Machiavelli called "the greatest patron of literature and art that any prince has ever been...." Although Lorenzo himself commissioned relatively few major works, he was an important arbiter of taste. An avid collector of Greek and Roman antiquities, he helped imprint the Florentine Renaissance with the humanism of the ancient world.

One of the artists employed by the Medici was Botticelli, a member of Lorenzo's circle of poets and scholars. Botticelli's lyrical paintings matched the cerebral refinement of Florence's humanists, especially the Neoplatonic philosophers, who saw beauty as a way to approach an understanding of the divine. Botticelli's ethereal figures, defined by line rather than modeled with light and shadow, seem to float, their drapery billowing in graceful patterns. His subjects, both mythological and religious, are imbued with lyricism and mystery.

Despite their delight in pagan themes, most Florentine humanists remained deeply pious. In the 1480s and 1490s, the Dominican friar Savonarola gave impassioned sermons attacking luxury and the amorality of ancient gods. He attracted many followers, including it seems Botticelli, who abandoned mythological subjects. After Lorenzo died in 1492, economic and political disasters put Florence in the hands of Savonarola's radical religious reformers. Vigilantes patrolled the streets, and citizens consigned luxury goods, including untold numbers of paintings and other works of art, to the consuming flames of bonfires—Bonfires of the Vanities.

Botticelli
Italian (Florentine), 1444/1445-1510

Giuliano de' Medici, about 1478

Giuliano, younger brother of Lorenzo, was nursing a bad knee on Easter 1478 and had to be helped to the cathedral—by men intending to kill him and his brother during mass. The assassins, members and supporters of the Pazzi family, banking rivals of the Medici, awaited their signal. As worshipers bowed their heads at the elevation of the host, Giuliano was brutally stabbed. Lorenzo escaped to the sacristy, remaining in its refuge while the Pazzi partisans attempted to seize the government. They soon failed, however, and Lorenzo resumed control.

The murder of Giuliano shocked Florence, and a number of portraits were ordered for public display to serve both as memorials and as warnings to other plotters. This painting may have been the prototype for that series. The open window was a familiar symbol of death, alluding to the deceased's passage to the afterlife. Some scholars, noting the lowered eyelids, suggest this portrait was painted posthumously from a death mask. Most, however, believe it was begun before Giuliano's death, perhaps even commissioned by Giuliano himself to commemorate the death of his beloved Simonetta, two years earlier. On the ledge is a dove, which mates for life; it is perched on a dead branch, the only place, according to Renaissance lore, doves alight after their mates have died. Without written evidence, it is impossible to say for certain exactly what function this painting originally served.

Tempera on panel, .756 x .526 m (29 3/4 x 20 5/8 in.). Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.5.56

Botticelli

The Adoration of the Magi, early 1480s

For most of the fifteenth century, Epiphany was celebrated in Florence with a great festival. Expensively clad citizens reenacted the journey of the three kings to Bethlehem with processions through the streets. Shortly before this work was painted, however, the elaborate pageantry of the festival was curtailed. Preachers like Savonarola complained about excessive luxury and neglect of the day's religious significance.

Botticelli's painting seems to reflect this new concern. He places Jesus at the center of a powerful X formed by the opposing triangles of kneeling worshipers and the roof of the manger. The viewer, rather than being overwhelmed by rich detail, is instead aware of the quiet distance between him and the holy figures—and like the worshipers in the painting leans toward the infant. This yearning to close the gap between human existence and the divine was a frequent Neoplatonic theme.

Botticelli may have painted this while in Rome working on the Sistine Chapel. Rearing horses in the background, for example, appear to reflect the colossal horses of the Dioscuri. The classical architecture of the manger and the crumbling ruins, however, also have theological significance. Legend held that earthquakes destroyed pagan temples at the moment Christ was born, and in a more general sense ruins suggest that the old order of the Law is supplanted by the new era of Grace made possible by Christ's birth.

Tempera and oil on panel, .702 x 1.042 m (27 5/8 x 41 in.). Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.22

Biagio d'Antonio da Firenze
Italian (Florentine), about 1445–probably 1510

The Triumph of Camillus, about 1480

Subjects like this one, taken from Livy, showcased the learning and sophistication of Renaissance patrons and were especially popular in domestic settings. Workshops specializing in painted wedding chests (cassoni) were virtual laboratories where artists experimented with new subject matter. This painting was once thought to be from such a chest, but its size suggests that it was probably displayed friezelike with other panels in the home of a wealthy Florentine family.

Here, the Roman Senate honors the hero Camillus with a triumphal parade through Rome. Sometimes called the second Romulus, Camillus returned from exile to rescue Rome from besieging Gauls. When informed that the city was ready to capitulate by paying off the enemy, Camillus stirred his troops and fellow citizens with powerful rhetoric. "With iron," he said, "and not with gold, Rome buys her freedom." This spirit of republican virtue appealed to fifteenth-century Florentines, who regarded ancient Rome as a paradigm for their own city. The scene's relevance was enhanced by its contemporary costumes and other familiar details. The decorated parade floats recalled the lavish spectacle of processions in Florence. And, the battered and blood-stained walls of the city enclose several buildings that could be recognized in Rome, including the dome of the Pantheon and the drums of Castel Sant'Angelo. Probably the heraldic colors that drape the horses belonged to the painting's patron, as yet unidentified.

Tempera on panel, .600 x 1.543 m (23 5/8 x 60 3/4 in.). Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.153

Jacopo del Sellaio
Italian (Florentine), 1441/1442–1493

Saint John the Baptist,
probably about 1480

Small devotional images such as this were produced in large numbers by craftsmen and lesser-known artists for the homes of Florence's middle class. These artists often worked in leading workshops when extra assistants were needed for important commissions. We know, for example, that Jacopo worked with Filippo Lippi, Ghirlandaio, and Botticelli.

This painting reflects the concerns of Florentine merchants and their pride in the city. John the Baptist was the patron saint of Florence, and we see him here before the city skyline. Clear in the distant landscape are the Palazzo Vecchio, center of the city administration; Brunelleschi's huge cathedral dome; and the campanile designed by Giotto. (It is one of our earliest views of Florence.) Other details preserve a traditional, conservative religious outlook. The bowl at the saint's foot recalls his baptism of Christ, while goldfinches, whose red markings were believed to have been made by Christ's crown of thorns, would remind viewers of the Crucifixion. Most telling is the axe sunk into the tree trunk at the left edge of the painting, which refers to Luke 3:9 "...every tree therefore which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down." This was a pointed warning against the unorthodox beliefs of some of the city's patrician elite, echoing Savonarola's sermons against their dangerously paganlike tendencies.

Oil on panel, .518 x .327 m (20 3/8 x 12 7/8 in.). Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.283

Workshop of Andrea del Verrocchio
(possibly Leonardo da Vinci)
Italian (Florentine), 1452–1519

Madonna and Child with a Pomegranate, 1470/1475

The workshop of a Renaissance artist was both studio and school, where apprentices were trained to paint in the style of the master. Since large commissions required the efforts of many painters, backgrounds, still-life details, and secondary figures were often painted by assistants. A master might also give lesser commissions entirely over to his assistants, simply approving the work as meeting his standard. It is often difficult to distinguish the work of the master from that of talented assistants whose individual styles were not yet fully developed.

It has often been thought that this tiny Madonna and Child was painted by the young Leonardo da Vinci, who worked in Verrocchio's studio. Details in the hands—the Virgin's crooked finger, for example—recall his drawings. The distant vista has the hazy, atmospheric quality of a Leonardo landscape. And the soft delicacy of the Virgin's face hints at the smoky shadowing—*sfumato*—that distinguishes Leonardo as a painter. Opponents of the theory note the Child's awkward posture and point to equally compelling parallels in the work of Lorenzo de Credi, another of Verrocchio's assistants. At present it is impossible to know who among Verrocchio's shop painted this picture.

Oil on panel, .157 x .128 m (6 1/8 x 5 in.). Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.5.65

Domenico Ghirlandaio
Italian (Florentine), 1449–1494

Madonna and Child,
about 1470

In a city filled with artists, the busiest workshop in the later 1400s was that of Domenico Ghirlandaio. His popularity rested on the conventional piety of his images, his direct and forthright style, and his high standards of craftsmanship. These qualities probably appealed to the average Florentine, who was less attracted by the humanist erudition and advanced tastes that enthralled the city's elite. Works like this devout image contrast with the sensuality and luxury denounced by Savonarola.

The gold background is unusual—a little old-fashioned for a painting done in the 1470s. It is not clear whether the present gilt surface (not original) replaced original gilding or was applied over a now-obliterated landscape, such as seen elsewhere in this room. If the painting was gilded from the outset, this would have been specified in the contract between artist and patron. Until the mid-fifteenth century, the intrinsic value of materials—gold and costly pigments like ultramarine, which is made from lapis lazuli—accounted for much of a painting's worth. By the time this work was made, however, the emphasis had shifted. Patrons had come—as we do today—to value instead the skill of the painter.

Tempera on panel transferred to hardboard, .734 x .508 m (28 7/8 x 20 in.). Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.49

Filippino Lippi
Italian (Florentine), about 1457–1504

The Coronation of the Virgin,
about 1480

Filippino was the son of artist Fra Filippo Lippi, whose work can be seen nearby in Gallery 4. His father, however, died when the boy was only twelve, about the age when he would have begun his artistic training. Filippino's education was taken over by his father's pupil, Botticelli, and their association lasted many years.

This painting is probably a very early work by Filippino—some, in fact, believe it to be his earliest one to survive. At this point in his career, Filippino was still strongly under Botticelli's influence. The lyrical and graceful line—the rippling cascades of drapery and the fanlike fall of cloth at the Virgin's hem—show Filippino's debt to his teacher, but the confident colors are the artist's own. As his style matured, Filippino moved away from the linearity of Botticelli. The diaphanous shimmer of fabric and sad delicacy of his faces give his works an elusive and poetic quality.

The half-round shape of this painting, called a lunette, was used most often over doorways. Probably this one was placed over the entrance to a private chapel or sacristy, but its original location remains unknown.

Tempera on panel, .902 x 2.223 m (35 1/2 x 87 1/2 in.). Samuel H. Kress Collection 1943.4.36

Filippino Lippi

Tobias and the Angel, probably about 1480

The apocryphal Book of Tobit tells the story of Tobit of Ninevah, a poor and blind man of good faith. He sent his son Tobias to a distant city to collect money he had deposited there, hiring a companion to accompany the youth. This turned out to be the archangel Raphael in disguise. The journey was successful: not only was the money returned, but medicine made from a monstrous fish Tobias encountered along the way cured Tobit's blindness.

The story was particularly popular in Florence, due in part to its appeal for merchant families, many of whose sons were sent, like Tobias, to trade in faraway cities. Its suggestion of reward for fair dealing was a welcome promise, but the subject may also have had political overtones. Earlier in the 1400s, the Medici had engineered the dissolution of a religious confraternity known as the Misericordia, whose power and influence among the city's laboring classes was growing. One of the mutual aid societies that helped provide needed services to Florence's poorer citizens, it buried the dead and claimed "S. Tobia" as its patron. Many of its dispersed members joined another religious confraternity—the Compagnia di Raffaello—though within a few years Cosimo de' Medici had made concessions and invited them to join a new organization. Finally in 1475, the Misericordia was reinstated. Perhaps the many images of Tobias and Raphael painted in the intervening years—or like this one shortly after—were appreciated as statements of protest and a way to preserve memory of the group.

Oil on canvas, .325 x .235 m (12 7/8 x 9 1/4 in.). Samuel H. Kress Collection 1939.1.229

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The works of art discussed here are sometimes temporarily moved to other rooms or removed from display.

August 1994